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Multilingual families: Aspirations and Challenges

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Editorial

Multilingual families: Aspirations and Challenges

The theme and the title for this special issue developed from a thematic colloquium that we organized at the annual meeting of the American Association for Applied Linguistics held in Portland, Oregon, USA, in March of 2017. Transnational migration has in recent years not only intensified encounters of different traditions and sociocultural values, it has also had a significant impact on language in society and resulted in a rising number of transcultural, multilingual families. Transnational and transcultural multilingual families have come increasingly under scrutiny in recent scholarship (Macalister & Mirvahedi 2017, Curdt-Christiansen & Lanza 2018). While some multilingual families are recently established, others have existed for generations; globalization only serves to intensify the meetings of various values, traditions, and languages of the various members of the family (cf. Lanza & Li Wei 2016). The burgeoning transdisciplinary field of family language policy addresses issues involving the role of language in the social unit of the family and bridging the gap between studies of child language and the field of language policy research (King, Fogle, & Logan-Terry 2008; Curdt-Christiansen 2009). Family language policy originally focused on explicit and overt planning in relation to language use within home domains and among family members; however, more recent approaches orient to linguistic and literacy practices in the home, in line with more current approaches to language policy research (Curdt-Christensen 2013). While much work in the field has focused on language learning outcomes of policies and practices (Schwartz and Verschik 2013), more recent work focuses on meaning-making and language-mediated experiences in the family (King & Lanza 2018).

This special issue brings together five empirical studies that examine how diverse language practices and policies, as well as ideologies, are represented in the multiplicity of family experiences of language socialization. These studies illustrate that while both explicit and implicit language ideologies can shape language practices in families, implicit language ideologies can also be embodied in linguistic practices. As language plays a key role in multilingual families, family members' social aspirations mediated through language may be confronted with challenges within the family and in society. While the aspirations can be motivated by personal, social, cultural or political factors, challenges too can arise within a family, from a given society, of a cultural or political nature.

The articles in this special issue address the aspirations and challenges multilingual families encounter, with a particular focus on the role of identity, agency and ideology in the diversity of experiences in these families with data coming from various settings from Europe to South Africa. Through examples from two multilingual families from different (linguistic) backgrounds in Belgium, Van Mensel investigates how a language policy takes shape in a family's everyday interactions, invoking the notions of a multilingual family language repertoire and a multilingual familylect. Obojska and Purkarthofer address agency in language learning, maintenance and management, as constructed by members of two transnational families living in Norway through biographically oriented interviews. The contribution by Palviainen and Bergroth illustrates the intricate relationships between language ideologies in discourses about language and culture, and how linguistic identities are created and performed among parents and passed on to their children. Da Costa Cabral's article illustrates the importance of considering the life trajectories, language ideologies and linguistic investment of transnational families in her ethnographic study of two multilingual families who moved from Timor-Leste to Northern Ireland. Coetzee examines processes of 'family making' in the contradictions between language socialization practices and expressed family language policies around children's acquisition of swearwords involving young children with adolescent parents living in different households. Finally, Higgins' commentary draws together the issues highlighted in the articles by integrating them within a framework (the Douglas Fir model 2016), developed in the field of second language acquisition to reconceptualize the nature of language learning within a multilingual world.

The contributions to this special issue advance the field of family language policy not only by bringing in experiences from new linguistic and cultural groups, but also by critically assessing the complex dimensions of families and showing how transcultural families manage their linguistic and cultural heritage in contemporary society.

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